

Contraceptive is linked to high STD risk

By Rita Rubin, USA TODAY August 22, 2004

Use of the contraceptive Depo Provera appears to triple women's risk of infection with chlamydia and gonorrhea, a study reports Monday.

An estimated 20 million to 30 million women worldwide use Depo Provera, which is injected into the arm or buttocks every three months.

"It's popular among young women particularly," says Christine Mauck of the Contraceptive Research and Development Program in Arlington, Va. Not only is it convenient and effective, says Mauck, who wasn't involved in the new study, "it can't be found by your mother."

But other studies have suggested that Depo Provera, as well as oral contraceptives, raise users' risk of contracting chlamydia and gonorrhea, two common sexually transmitted diseases.

The study, which appears in the journal *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, focused on 819 women ages 15 to 45 who were just starting birth control prescribed at two Baltimore-area Planned Parenthood clinics. About three-quarters were single. Of the women, 354 chose the pill, 114 chose Depo Provera and 351 opted for a non-hormonal contraceptive. The women were tested for chlamydia and gonorrhea after three, six and 12 months.

By the end, 45 women had contracted chlamydia or gonorrhea. Women using Depo Provera were about three and a half times more likely to develop one of the infections than women using non-hormonal contraceptives. The researchers say they can't yet explain their finding.

They also found that pill users were 50% more likely to become infected than users of non-hormonal contraceptives, but there were so few cases that could have been due to chance, says lead author Charles Morrison of Family Health International in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

Morrison says one or two more high-quality studies are needed to confirm his findings. But, he says, the study does highlight the need for hormonal contraceptive users to also use condoms if they aren't in mutually monogamous relationships. Hormonal contraceptives alone don't protect against STDs, and, as this study suggests, Depo Provera might raise the risk of infection.

Because researchers didn't randomly assign women to contraceptive methods, they can't be absolutely sure whether the Depo Provera itself or some characteristic of women who opted for it raised the infection risk, Mauck says. But the authors say it's unlikely that differences in the women led to the finding.

The study was paid for by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Popular forms of birth control

Use of Depo Provera, a contraceptive shot given once every three months, has been rising dramatically around the world.

But the most recent U.S. data, nearly a decade old, show that this method lags far behind sterilization and the pill, which are still expected to top the list when updated data are released this year.

Percentage of U.S. women using:

Tubal sterilization: 27.7

The pill: 26.9

Male condom: 20.4

Partner's vasectomy: 10.9

Depo Provera: 3.0

Source: Alan Guttmacher Institute

Injected Contraceptive Raises STD Risk – Study

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By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Correspondent
WASHINGTON (Reuters) –

Women who use the injected contraceptive Depo-Provera have a higher rate of sexually transmitted diseases, U.S. researchers reported on Monday.

This holds true even when behavior and other factors are taken into account, the research team at the National Institutes of Health University of North Carolina and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore found.

More study is needed, but it is possible that Depo-Provera itself causes a susceptibility to STDs, said Charles Morrison of Family Health International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, who led the study.

"We did adjust for differences in condom use, differences in multiple partners, differences in the number of sexual coital acts," Morrison said in a telephone interview.

Inner-city and younger women also had a higher risk of STDs, but using Depo-Provera added to the risk, study found.

Morrison said the researchers were especially concerned because Depo-Provera or its generic equivalent are being increasingly used in Africa, where STDs such as the AIDS virus are very common.

He said women who use Depo-Provera to prevent pregnancy should take extra care if they are in relationships in which either they or their partner have sex with other people. Like birth control pills, Depo-Provera provides no protection from an infection such as syphilis, gonorrhea or the AIDS virus.

"For sexually active women not in a mutually monogamous relationship, limiting the number of partners may also help to reduce the risk," Morrison added.

The researchers studied about 800 women age 15 to 45 using two clinics in the Baltimore area -- one urban, serving mostly black women, and one suburban with a client base of white, college-age women. Most were single.

The women chose whether they wanted to use Depo-Provera, contraceptive pills, or a non-hormonal contraceptive method.

After a year, 45 women had become infected with chlamydia or gonorrhea. The women using the injected contraceptive were three times as likely to have one of the STDs, the researchers said.

Women taking the pills did not have a higher risk of getting an STD, the researchers report in the September issue of the journal Sexually Transmitted Diseases. Because there were different numbers of women in each group, the researchers calculated risk of infection by "women-years" -- how many women became infected in the space of a year.

The risk for women taking oral contraceptives was 3.9 infections per 100 women-years, 13.7 per 100 women-years in the Depo-Provera group and 6 per 100 women-years in the women using condoms, diaphragms or other non-drug birth control methods.

Morrison said although it appeared from looking at the bare numbers that the pill group had the lowest risk, in fact when other factors were considered their risk of STDs was about the same as the women who did not use hormonal contraception.

Depo-Provera is made by Pfizer Inc. and last month Israel's Teva Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd. won U.S. approval for a generic version